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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 5,745,932 :
Issue Date: May 5, 1998 :
Application No. 08/755,393 :
Filed: November 22, 1996 :
For: HOT TUB COVER AND ENCLOSURE :
: :
: :

ON PETITION

This is a decision on the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b), filed April 12, 2012, to accept the unavoidably delayed payment of a maintenance fee for the above-identified patent.

The petition is **DISMISSED**.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision. No extension of this 2-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f). The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below, since, after a decision on the petition for reconsideration, the Director will undertake no further reconsideration or review of the matter. This includes statements by all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of the delay, setting forth the facts, as they know them. If a request for reconsideration is filed, it must establish that the entire delay in the submission of the maintenance fee was unavoidable.

The patent issued May 5, 1998. The 11.5 year (third) maintenance fee could have been paid from May 5, 2009 through November 4, 2009 or with a surcharge during the period from November 5, 2009 through May 5, 2010. Accordingly, the patent expired on May 6, 2010, for failure to timely submit the 11.5 year maintenance fee.

A petition to accept the delayed payment of a maintenance fee under 35 USC 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by (1) an adequate showing that the delay was unavoidable, since reasonable care was taken to insure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, and (3) payment of the surcharge set forth in 37 CFR 1.20(i)(1). This petition lacks item (1) above.

A petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) for the acceptance of an unavoidably delayed payment of maintenance fee is considered under the same standard as that for reviving an application unavoidably abandoned under 37 CFR 1.137(a) because 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1) uses the identical language, *i.e.*, "unavoidable" delay.¹ Decisions reviving abandoned applications have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable.² In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account."³ Finally, a petition to revive an application as unavoidably abandoned cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing the cause of the unavoidable delay.⁴

The general standard applied by the Office requires petitioner to establish that petitioner treated the patent the same as a reasonable and prudent person would treat his or her most important business.⁵ However, "the question of whether an applicant's delay in prosecuting an application was unavoidable [will] be decided on a case by case basis, taking all of the facts and circumstances into account".⁶ Nonawareness of the content of, or misunderstanding of PTO statutes, PTO rules, the MPEP or Official Gazette notices, do not constitute unavoidable delay.⁷ The statute requires a "showing" by petitioner. Therefore, petitioner has the burden of proof.

The word 'unavoidable' ... is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business.⁸

¹ Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-09, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1787 (Fed. Cir. 1995)(quoting In re Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (Comm'r Pat. 1988)).

² Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (Comm'r Pat. 1887) (the term "unavoidable" "is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful man in relation to their most important business"); In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (D.C. Cir. 1912); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (Comm'r Pat. 1913).

³ Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). (citing Potter v. Dann, 201 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 574 (D.D.C. 1978) for the proposition that counsel's nonawareness of PTO rules does not constitute unavoidable delay); Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 1985 U.S. Dist. Lexis 23119, 13 230 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 621 (D.D.C. 1985) (Plaintiffs through their counsel's actions or their own must be held responsible for having noted the MPEP section and Official Gazette notices expressly stating that the certified mailing procedures outlined in 37 CFR 1.8(a) do not apply to continuation applications).

⁴ Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 5 USPQ2d 1130 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

⁵ The Commissioner is responsible for determining the standard for unavoidable delay and for applying that standard 35 U.S.C. 41(c)(1) states, "The Commissioner may accept the payment of any maintenance fee...at any time...if the delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Commissioner to have been unavoidable (emphasis added).

⁶ Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d at 533.

⁷ *Id.* at 538.

⁸ In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (1912)(quoting Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (1887)); see also Winkler v. Ladd, 221 F. Supp. 550, 552, 138 U.S.P.Q. 666, 167-68 (D.D.C. 1963), aff'd, 143 U.S.P.Q. 172 (D.C. Cir. 1963); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (1913).

PETITIONER'S ARGUMENT

- Petitioner Barovetto maintains that the reason for the delay in submitting the 11.5 year maintenance fee was due to the illness of petitioner's wife. Petitioner states that he focused on his wife's health and put the dream of his invention on the shelf until her recovery.
- Unfortunately, petitioner's wife passed away in 2009. Petitioner states during that time period the third maintenance fee became due and passed without his recognition.
- Petitioner states with the impact of the internet and social media they can market the product directly to the consumer. As a tribute to his wife and a belief that the invention has value he is continuing efforts to manufacture and offer the product to the market place.

APPLICATION OF THE UNAVOIDABLE STANDARD

Petitioner's arguments have been considered but are not persuasive. In general a grantable petition under 37 CFR 1.378 (b) must show 1) petitioner knew of the need to make the maintenance fee payment, 2) implemented a reliable docketing system to track the relevant dates 3) treated the payment of the maintenance fee (and later the filing of a petition to reinstate) as his most important business 4) was prevented from making the payment and 5) must show the entire delay in making the payment and submitting a grantable petition was unavoidable.

In essence, petitioner must show that he was aware of the need to pay the maintenance fee, and to that end was tracking it, or had engaged someone to track it before the expiration, but when the fee came due, was "unavoidably" prevented from making the maintenance fee payment due. In determining whether a delay in paying a maintenance fee was unavoidable, one looks to whether the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fee exercised the due care of a reasonably prudent person. Ray, 55 F3d at 608-609, 34 USPQ2d at 1787. It is incumbent upon the patent owner to implement steps to schedule and pay the fee, or obligate another to do so. See California Medical Products v. Technol. Med. Prod., 921 F.Supp 1219, 1259 (D. Del. 1995). That is, 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps in place to pay the maintenance fee, and the record currently lacks a showing that any steps were emplaced by petitioner or anyone else. In the absence of a showing that petitioner or anyone else was engaged in tracking the maintenance fee due dates, and that party had in fact been tracking the due dates with a reliable tracking system, such as would be used by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business, petitioner cannot reasonably show that the delay was unavoidable delay. In re Katrapat, 6 USPQ2d 1863, 1867-1868 (Comm'r Pat. 1988); California, supra.

When determining whether a delay in paying a maintenance fee is unavoidable, the Office looks at whether the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fee exercised the due care of a

reasonably prudent person.⁹ The petition does not demonstrate that anyone maintained a tracking system. Petitioner has failed to provide any evidence that patentee Barovetto was tracking the maintenance fee due dates.

In the absence of a showing that any steps had been taken, then 37 CFR 1.378(b) precludes acceptance of the payment. In other words, if no steps were taken by Mr. Barovetto to track the fee payment, then the subsequent delay is immaterial. The showing must be that when the system indicated the fee fell due, petitioner was "unavoidably" prevented from taking any earlier action with respect to this patent.

Assuming that petitioner was able to make a showing to establish that a system for tracking maintenance fee due dates but was unavoidably prevented due to the illness of his wife, a showing that this condition was such that he was unable to take action to avoid expiration of the patent. Petitioner must demonstrate from the time that the maintenance fee could have paid until the filing of a grantable petition that the illness was such that the maintenance fee could not be paid due to taking care of his wife. Additionally, petitioner must state how he manages to conduct his daily personal and business affairs, including scheduling and settlement of short and long term debts and business obligations, bills, rent or mortgage payments, income taxes etc., during the time in question. Petitioner must demonstrate that taking care of his wife unavoidably delayed the submission of the maintenance fee. It is further noted that the window for payment of the maintenance fee remained open through May 5, 2010 after patentee's wife passed sometime in 2009.

To the extent petitioner seeks to argue that his financial resources were shrinking, a showing of unavoidable delay based upon financial condition must establish that the financial condition of the petitioner during the entire period of the delay was such as to excuse the delay. See *Ex parte Murray*, 1891 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 130, 131 (1891). The showing of record does not adequately establish that petitioner's entire delay in paying the third maintenance fee was unavoidable within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b).

A complete showing, with supporting documentation, is required of the financial condition of petitioner or the party responsible for payment of the maintenance fees. Such showing should include all income, expenses, assets, credit, and obligations, which made the delay in payment of the maintenance fee from, until the filing of the petition "unavoidable." A monthly breakdown is preferred. In essence, petitioner must show that she was aware of the need to pay the maintenance fee, and to that end was tracking it, or had engaged someone to track it before the expiration, but when the fee came due, was financially unable to make the payment until the petition was filed. The showing should include documentary proof of the maintenance fee tracking system, the entry of this patent in that system and an explanation of how the system worked.

Further, if Mr. Barovetto reached a decision that the above-identified patent lacked sufficient commercial value to justify the expense of paying the maintenance fee, such a conclusion of lack

⁹ See *Kim v. Quigg*, 718 F. Supp 1280, 1284 12 USPQ2d 1604, 1607(E.D. Va 1989).

of commercial value is neither unavoidable nor is it unintentional. A deliberate act is not rendered unintentional or unavoidable when an applicant or assignee reviews the same facts a second time, which changes their minds as to the appropriate action to pursue. See *In re Application of G*, 11 USPQ2d 1378, 1380 (Comm'r Pat. 1989).

Accordingly, the facts presented do not allow for a finding of unavoidable delay.

When filing documentation in support of applications or petitions, please take steps to protect all personal information. "Personal information" includes social security, credit card and banking account numbers. This type of personal data is never required by the USPTO to support a petition or application. To protect your privacy, we suggest that you delete such information from any documentation you send the office.

The file does not indicate a change of address has been submitted, although the address given on the petition differs from the address of record. If appropriate, a change of address should be filed in accordance with MPEP 601.03. A courtesy copy of this decision is being mailed to the address given on the petition; however, the Office will mail all future correspondence solely to the address of record.

Petitioner's current options

I. Petitioner may file a request for reconsideration.

Any request for reconsideration of this decision must be filed within **TWO MONTHS** of the mailing date of this decision. Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the \$400 petition fee set forth in §1.17(h). After decision on the petition for reconsideration, no further reconsideration or review of the matter will be undertaken by the Director. Accordingly, on request for reconsideration, it is extremely important the petitioner supply **any** and **all** relevant information and documentation in order to meet his burden of showing unavoidable delay. This includes statements by all persons with direct knowledge of the cause of the delay, setting forth the facts as they know them. If a request for reconsideration is filed, it must establish that the entire delay in the submission of the maintenance fee was unavoidable.

II. Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge which accompanied the petition.

Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge by writing to the Office of Finance, Commissioner for Patents, P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, VA 22313. A copy of this decision should accompany petitioner's request.

III. Petitioner may wish to file a petition under 37 CFR 1.378(c).

Petitioner may wish to consider filing a petition to reinstate the patent based on unintentional expiration under 37 CFR 1.378(c). The surcharge of for the unintentional petition under 37 CFR

1.378 (c) is \$1,640. If petitioner has previously submitted the surcharge for unavoidable delay. The unavoidable surcharge (\$700) can be applied to the unintentional surcharge (\$1640). In general, a petition under 37 CFR 1.378 (c) needs to state that expiration of the patent was unintentional, whereas a petition under 37 CFR 1.378 (c) must prove that the entire delay in payment was unintentional.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By Mail: Mail Stop PETITION
 Commissioner for Patents
 Post Office Box 1450
 Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By Hand: U. S. Patent and Trademark Office
 Customer Service Window, Mail Stop Petitions
 Randolph Building
 401 Dulany Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314

The centralized facsimile number is (571) 273-8300.

Correspondence regarding this decision may also be filed through the electronic filing system of the USPTO.

Telephone inquiries should be directed to the undersigned at (571) 272-3215.



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